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ABSTRACT

This research deals with a series of preliminary studies of the management of questions by second language learners of Swedish. Question management here refers to the ability to produce an utterance which successfully elicits a response from an interlocutor, and the ability to determine correctly when a response is required. The three exploratory studies involve a listening test, a production task, and input studies. The listening test compared native and non-native listeners' ability to detect questions in Swedish. The study concentrated on the perception of rising intonation as a question marker. The second phase addressed the question of learners' reliance on intonation as a marker in the production of questions, as well as the way this compares with native performance. The input studies concerned observation of the speech of a native speaker of Swedish teaching Swedish as a second language. Her speech behavior in class was compared with her speech in conversation with another native speaker. Results indicate that transfer from English to Swedish and input influences account for some of the data, but not all of it. Therefore, it might be useful to consider the differences between native and non-native speech as a function of the differences in purpose of the native and the learner. (AMH)

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# Managing Questions:
# Data from Second Language Learners of Swedish

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The research to be discussed here grew out of the observation that my students in Swedish who could apparently produce grammatical questions in the target language while in the classroom seemed to have difficulty spotting questions directed to them in conversations with native speakers. This led me to question the assumption that production in the classroom is an adequate predictor of a student's ability to manage questions in conversational situations.

Here, I will report on a series of preliminary studies of the management of questions by second language learners of Swedish. Question management, as used hereafter, refers to the accomplishment of two tasks in ordinary conversation. One is the ability to produce an utterance which successfully elicits a response from an interlocutor; the other is the ability to correctly determine when a response is required. Notice that this operational definition of question does not rely on formal properties of utterances but rather on their function in discourse.

Taken together, the studies seek to make precise the differences between native and learner question management in Swedish, to describe those differences, and to suggest possible sources for them.

## Listening Test

The first study was designed to compare native and non-native listeners' ability to detect questions in Swedish. In English, one marker that may be used to signal questions is rising terminal intonation; thus, it was hypothesized that learners might transfer a perceptual strategy of attending to terminal intonation contours when processing Swedish utterances. In fact, Gårding and Abrahamson (1965) had reported that American subjects who hear level to rising intonation in synthesized speech will perceive the stimulus as a question, while they will perceive falling intonation as marking a statement.

For Swedish, the role of rising intonation as a question marker was the subject of some dispute. Traditional descriptions claimed that Swedish questions rise (in various circumstances) but recent experimental work suggests that they do not (Johansson, 1978; Hadding-Koch and Studdert-Kennedy, 1964,1965; Studdert-Kennedy and Hadding-Koch, 1973). Because the facts of Swedish were not established, several predictions could be made about learner performance, as follows:

a) If transfer is not operating, American subjects will disagree as to whether a given utterance is a question or not, regardless of the intonation of the utterance;

b) If transfer is operating, and if Swedish questions have rising intonation, American subjects will be able to successfully detect questions in Swedish;

c) If transfer is operating, and if Swedish questions do not have rising intonation, American subjects will be unable to successfully detect questions in Swedish.

For this test, three semi-spontaneous conversations between native speakers of Swedish were audiotaped and edited to form a master tape containing 25 Swedish utterances. This tape included utterances which had been interpreted by the original participants as questions of various types. 60 paid subjects were then asked to listen to the utterances over headphones and indicate which form of punctuation would be most appropriate for each test item: question mark, period, or exclamation point. The last two categories were collapsed in the analysis of data.

The 60 subjects were essentially self-selecting, and were drawn from three groups: 20 native Swedes in Sweden, 20 American learners of Swedish in Sweden, and 20 Americans in Seattle who reported that they had never heard, and knew not a word of Swedish. Chi-square analysis was used to determine the strength of within-group agreement on each item. Between-group comparisons are given on Table 1.

Not surprisingly, native speakers readily agreed on the classification of utterances. What is surprising is that Americans with 60 hours of instruction in Swedish barely performed better than Americans who knew not a word of the language. In other words, it seems that knowledge of syntax and semantics does not help very much in making such judgments.

Table 1

Results of Listening Test

Frequency of Accurate Group Judgments

| | Group[a] | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Judgments | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | Statements | | |
| Correct | 10 | 8 | 9 |
| Incorrect | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Nonsignificant[b] | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| | Questions | | |
| Correct | 11 | 4 | 2 |
| Incorrect | 0 | 3 | 5 |
| Nonsignificant | 1 | 5 | 5 |

Note. Three of the original 25 test items were omitted from the data analysis because native speaker judgments differed from original interlocutors'.

[a]Group 1: native speakers of Swedish; Group 2: Americans with 60 hours of Swedish instruction; Group 3: Americans with no knowledge of Swedish.

[b]$p < .01$.

The fact that both groups of Americans agreed on and detected utterances which were statements suggests both that Americans were attending to terminal intonation (falling in both Swedish and English) and that this was a successful strategy.

On the other hand, agreement within each American group was fairly low for utterances which were questions, indicating that transfer may be operating to some extent but not completely. The fact that the naive Americans had little success in detecting questions, to the extent that transfer was operating, supports the notion that Swedish questions do not necessarily have rising intonation.

At this point, it seemed that intonation could not be ruled out as an important signal for Americans in judging Swedish utterances in spite of the fact that it did not seem to be a very reliable marker. Perhaps students who knew and could produce other formal markers of questions did not detect them in discourse simply because intonation was a more salient marker for them, outweighing the syntactic and semantic messages they had perhaps received earlier in the utterance. This may simply be an example of a recency effect on memory, whereby the last item of a series is remembered better than previous items. The next question is whether learners also rely heavily on intonation as a marker in the production of questions, and how this compares with native performance.

## Production Task

In this study, four native-non-native dyads were videotaped while conversing in Swedish. Participants were simply asked to get acquainted with one another over coffee; conversations lasted from 15-20 minutes each. In the analysis of the data, an utterance was classified as a question if the native participant's behavior indicated that she had so classified it. That is, if the native treated the learner utterance as a question (by answering it; by reformulating it), it was analyzed as a question. If the native speaker showed that her own utterance was a question (by acknowledging a learner response as appropriate; by reformulating it to include formal question markers; by insisting on a response), then it was also analyzed as a question. Obviously this study cannot analyze utterances which the learner may have intended as questions but which were not interpreted as such by the native speaker.

Despite many personality and social differences between subjects, we can see in Table 2 a clear tendency for native speakers to dominate the question asking; they pose between 65%-75% of the questions in each conversation.

Each question was then coded for the presence or absence of the following markers: interrogative pronoun (WHP), subject-auxiliary/finite verb inversion (SAI), question particle (PRT), alternative marker (ALT), formal or informal tag (TAG), and rising intonation (?); questions with none of these markers were also coded (Ø). The percent of each subject's total

Table 2

Production Task

Number of Questions Produced by Subject

| | Dyad | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Subject | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Native | 41 (65%) | 41 (71%) | 27 (75%) | 40 (71%) |
| Learner | 22 (35%) | 17 (29%) | 9 (25%) | 16 (28%) |

questions which contain each of the given markers is presented on Table 3. These data can be discussed in terms of within-group differences and between-group differences.

In the first place, a good deal of individual preference for certain markers is present for both groups. For example, Native 1 marks 46% of her questions with a tag though the other native speakers scarcely use it at all. Native 2, on the other hand, shows a much stronger preference for unmarked questions than do the other natives (35% vs. 5-7%). Native 3 shows a stronger preference for rising intonation than do the other Swedes, and finally, Native 4 is much more likely than the others to mark a question with subject-auxiliary inversion. Because of this variation, non-native listeners must be prepared to attend to a variety of question markers in dealing with different interlocutors.

Secondly, there appear to be differences in preference for markers between natives and learners. Natives are more likely than learners to prefer particles, alternates, and tags to mark questions. They are also more likely to omit these markers altogether. Learners, on the other hand, are likely to rely more heavily than natives on rising intonation. Learner 3, for instance, uses rising intonation in 88% of her questions, in contrast to Native 2, who uses it to mark only 2% of her questions.

Additional differences between native and learner production can be found by comparing how markers are used in combination with one another for a given speaker (see Table 4).

Table 3

Production Task

Percent of Subject's Total Questions with Marker

| | | Question Marker | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Subject | N | WHP | SAI | PRT | ALT | TAG | ? | Ø |
| Native | | | | | | | | |
| 1 | 41 | 15 | 39 | 5 | 0 | 46 | 7 | 7 |
| 2 | 40 | 10 | 52 | 5 | 8 | 0 | 2 | 35 |
| 3 | 27 | 4 | 59 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 33 | 7 |
| 4 | 41 | 24 | 73 | 10 | 2 | 5 | 15 | 5 |
| Learner | | | | | | | | |
| 1 | 25 | 24 | 56 | 16 | 0 | 0 | 12 | 12 |
| 2 | 9 | 44 | 55 | 0 | 11 | 0 | 44 | 0 |
| 3[a] | 33 | 6 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 88 | 3 |

Note. WHP=interrogative pronoun; SAI=subject-auxiliary inversion; PRT=interrogative particle; ALT=alternate; TAG=tag; ?=rising intonation; Ø=none of these markers.

[a]Learner participated in two dyads; her data have been collapsed.

Table 4

Production Task

Markers Produced by Subject

| | Native | | | | Learner | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Markers[a] | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| WHP only | + | + | - | + | + | - | + |
| SAI only | + | + | + | + | + | + | + |
| PRT only | + | + | + | + | + | - | - |
| ? only | + | + | + | + | + | + | + |
| Ø | + | + | + | + | + | - | + |
| WHP+SAI | + | + | + | + | + | + | + |
| SAI+PRT | + | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| SAI+? | - | - | - | + | - | - | - |
| PRT+? | - | - | - | - | + | - | - |
| WHP+SAI+PRT | + | - | - | + | - | - | - |

[a]WHP=interrogative pronoun; SAI=subject-auxiliary inversion; PRT=interrogative particle; ALT=alternate; TAG=tag; ?=rising intonation; Ø=none of these markers.

In general, native speakers tended to use more combinations of markers than did learners. Two of the learners, for example, used no combination of markers otherthan the interrogative pronoun with subject-auxiliary inversion. Natives, on the other hand, combined two and even three markers for a given utterance.

In addition, certain combinations of markers were used only by native speakers, never by learners. Native 1, for example, combines subject-auxiliary inversion with the question particle, but no-one else does. Native 4 combines subject-auxiliary inversion with rising intonation. Due to the limited amount of data available, great caution should be exercised in interpreting these data, but they do suggest further research questions.

To summarize this study, it can be said that there are certain specific differences between native and learner use of question markers in production. We have seen that errors in perception of questions may be due to some level of transfer from the learner's native language; perhaps transfer can account for production of questions as well.

In support of the transfer hypothesis, it can be argued that the fact that learners do produce interrogative pronouns and subject-auxiliary inversion may be due to positive transfer from English. Furthermore, the fact that the learners prefer rising intonation over unmarked questions in contrast to the preferences of the native speakers may be an instance of negative transfer.

Transfer does not, however, account for learner performance in regard to other question markers. That is, even though English uses question particles (such as I suppose), alternatives (or), and tag questions much the same as Swedish, learners tend not to produce these markers in questions.

Recent studies (Ferguson, 1974; Ferguson and DeBose, 1977; Gaies 1976, 1977, 1979; Hatch and Gough, 1975; Huang and Hatch 1978; Peck, 1978) have suggested that one important resource for the learner is the speech to which she is exposed. What sort of Swedish was available to these learners?

## Input Studies

Two of the subjects in the production task described above were in fact teachers of Swedish as a second language in California. One teacher (Native 4) used a wider range of markers than other native speakers and most interestingly, used subject-auxiliary inversion in nearly 3/4 of her questions, far more than any other native speaker. If her speech is typical of Swedish-born teachers, students may regularly be exposed to a higher frequency of subject-auxiliary inversion than is found in the speech of most of the Swedish population.

The other teacher (Learner 1) did not show this tendency, but it must be noted that she was speaking with a native speaker, whereas the Swedish teacher was not.

In order to see if the American teacher of Swedish modified her speech when speaking to learners, I visited her beginning Swedish class (students had had approximately 25 hours of instruction from her) and coded all of the markers in her questions during a 50-minute class period (see Table 5).

Table 5

Input Study

Percent of Total Questions with Given Marker

| | Recipient of questions | |
|---|---|---|
| Marker[a] | Native speaker | Swedish class |
| WHP only | 4 | 1 |
| SAI only | 41 | 38 |
| PRT only | 4 | 2 |
| ALT only | 0 | 0 |
| ? only | 9 | 18 |
| Ø | 14 | 1 |
| WHP+SAI | 23 | 36 |
| SAI+? | 0 | 1 |
| PRT+? | 4 | 1 |
| WHP+SAI+? | 0 | 2 |
| N= | (22) | (142) |

Note. Subject was a non-native speaker of Swedish who teaches Swedish as a foreign language. In the production data discussed above, she is listed as Learner 1.

[a]WHP=interrogative pronoun; SAI=subject-auxiliary inversion; PRT=interrogative particle; ALT=alternate; TAG=tag; ?=rising intonation; Ø=none of these markers.

These data do show some interesting differences in the questions this speaker poses to her class and those she poses to the native speaker. For example, she uses rising intonation to mark questions twice as often when speaking to the class. On the other hand, she uses interrogative particles and completely unmarked questions far more often with the native speaker. Thus, if this behavior is representative of Swedish teachers elsewhere, it may be that learners are not getting exposure to Swedish as it actually is used between natives.

The teacher is, of course, not the only source of input to the learner. In order to understand something of the written resources available to American students, I coded all markers used in the questions found in the five beginning Swedish textbooks most used in the United States for teaching Swedish as a foreign language (see Table 6).

Despite a span of 15 years and differences in methodological approach, the texts are strikingly similar in their use of question markers. The two most important facts, in light of the data on learner production discussed above, are that subject-auxiliary inversion occurs in an extremely high number of questions (88%-98%) and that particles, alternates, and tag markers are relatively neglected in the texts.

To summarize this section, it can be seen that even a preliminary scan of the input available to the American learner is high in certain markers (subject-auxiliary inversion and rising intonation) but low in others (particles, alternates,

Table 6

Input Study

Percent of Textbook's Total Questions with Marker

| | | Marker[a] | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Text[b] | N | WHP | SAI | PRT | ALT | TAG | Ø |
| Learn Swedish | | | | | | | |
| 1959;GT | 251 | 43 | 96 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Lär er svenska | | | | | | | |
| 1968;ALM | 894 | 49 | 88 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 11 |
| Modern svenska | | | | | | | |
| 1972;GT | 599 | 57 | 95 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Svenska för er | | | | | | | |
| 1973;ALM | 388 | 41 | 94 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 3 |
| Svensk, svenska | | | | | | | |
| 1974;COG | 640 | 72 | 98 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |

[a]WHP=interrogative pronoun; SAI=subject-auxiliary inversion; PRT=interrogative particle; ALT=alternate; TAG=tag; Ø=none of these markers.

[b]GT=grammar-translation; ALM=audio-lingual method; COG=cognitive approach.

and tags). These proportions are reflected in the production of the learners but contrast to the production of the native speakers.

## Discussion

As we have seen, it appears that there are real and specific differences in the ways that learners and natives mark questions in Swedish. Because of the exploratory nature of these studies, no strong claims about the sources for these discrepancies can be advanced, yet a discussion of possible sources could be useful in formulating further research questions.

The listening test seemed to indicate that, bereft of semantic and syntactic clues, learners will indeed rely on sentence intonation to spot questions. The errors and successes which resulted from the way they interpreted the sentence intonation they heard in the listening test suggest that what is going on is transfer (at some level) from the learners' native language.

Transfer could also account for some of the production data: positive transfer seems to account for learner production of interrogative pronouns and subject-auxiliary inversion, while negative transfer seems to account for learner production in regard to rising intonation and unmarked questions.

Unfortunately, the transfer hypothesis does not account very well for the fact that learners neither perceive nor produce questions marked with particles, alternates, or tags, though all three of these markers exist in both languages.

For this reason, it seemed reasonable to hypothesize that the real source of learner output was the input to which she was exposed.

Realizing that these data are based on possible input rather than actual input, we can compare a variety of input data (Foreigner Talk by teachers; Teacher Talk in classroom; textbooks available) with learner performance.

Thus, what the learner perceives and produces can be a reflection of the abundance of interrogative pronouns, subject-auxiliary inversion, and rising intonation available. The lack of particles and alternates in learner performance can be accounted for by a corresponding lack in the input.

The input hypothesis does not, however, explain why learners seldom produce tag or unmarked questions, since both are available, at least in the speech addressed to them outside the classroom.

It seems, in fact, that while both the transfer hypothesis and the input hypothesis can account for some of the data, they do not account for all of the data nor do they offer the only account for the data.

Rather than dwelling on the differences between natives and non-natives <u>per se</u>, it might be more useful to consider these differences as a function of the differences in purpose of the native and the learner. Naturally, being human, both natives and learners will have many of the same conversational goals. For example, they may both wish to display status, achieve intimacy, elicit sympathy, or assert their wills.

In addition, however, the learner has special goals simply because she does not yet fully master the language like a native. It can be argued that two crucial goals to the learner are to elicit input and to avoid making errors. That is, in order to continue learning, it is necessary (although probably not sufficient) that the learner be exposed to the structures and vocabulary which she has not yet learned. Secondly, the learner may wish to avoid making errors if to do so increases her anxiety which may, in turn, distract her attention from the model.

The native speaker, on the other hand, generally does not need to seek language input for its own sake; the native probably also has less fear of making errors since she is relatively unlikely to do so.

What I am suggesting here is that learner use of question markers may not reflect learner competence in producing isolated questions (for example in an instructional setting) precisely because in actual conversation, conversational goals may override that competence. I believe this process can be inferred from the data in these studies, as follows.

Recall that learners used rising intonation to mark questions far more often than native speakers. VanderBrook, Schlue and Campbell have argued convincingly that in English questions, rising intonation is related to presupposition of a yes-answer, on the part of the speaker. Such presupposition is in turn related to certain discourse functions, namely:

understanding confirmation, acknowledgment of new or contradictory information, display of interest, or encouragement. According to these authors, these functions contrast with low-presupposition questions which have functions such as information elicitation and topic change (VanderBrook, Schlue and Campbell ( :184).

In viewing the conversations between learners and native speakers of Swedish, I had the sense that learners were not primarily trying to elicit information or change the topic; what they seemed to be trying to do was to encourage the native to keep to the topic long enough for them to recall the vocabulary and structures they needed to make a comment of their own about that topic. The learners are desperately trying to keep the conversation going, in order to elicit vocabulary and structures which they can touch off from. They may also be stalling for time in order to better monitor their utterance before they produce it and thus decrease the likelihood of error. To do so, they do indeed confirm that they understand (even when they do not), show interest, and generally encourage their native interlocutor. These functions, in turn presuppose a yes-answer and are marked with rising intonation.

Note that if this analysis is correct, it may actually be a case for transfer, since the arguments put forth by VanderBrook, Schlue and Campbell were based on discourse data from English. It is, however, transfer at a relatively abstract level.

The second point which supports the notion that learner goals affect learner performance in questions derives not from intonation but from learner use of other markers. If we assume that learners attempt to increase input and decrease the likelihood of making an error in conversation, it stands to reason that they will try to get the natives to do as much of the conversational work as possible. Quite simply, it is in the best interest of the learner to get herself interrupted.

Conversational analyst Harvey Sacks has noted that native speakers solicit interruptions as a signal of recognition from their recipients that they know what or who the speaker is talking about. Thus, the speaker appends a "series of description components" to her original utterance; these can be abandoned as soon as the recipient "recognizes what is being described" (cited in Jefferson, 1973:59).

A similar phenomenon has been noted for Swedish; in this case the speaker appends optional question markers, even to an otherwise fully-marked question, until the interlocutor interrupts with a response. Thus, potential gaps between turns are filled in (Butler-Wall, 1980a).

What is very interesting about the learner data presented here is that learners rarely use particles. Can we assume they do not want to be interrupted? On the contrary, I would argue that they want to be interrupted as soon as possible, in the hopes that the native will elegantly finish their questions for them and save them the effort of piecing together all the lexical items and inflectional endings they need to deal with. It is striking that both of the

high-frequency markers, interrogative pronoun and subject-auxiliary inversion, are sentence initial, while the low-frequency markers are not. Particles may be medial (following the finite verb) or sentence-final; tags are sentence-final. The learner simply does not want to wait that long to signal to the listener that a question is in progress. The crafty learner knows that native speakers, like parents, are all too eager to jump in and finish the ends of sentences for them.

Similarly, it can be argued that, for the learner, alternate questions are a waste of time, since they require the speaker to go through the process of question formation twice to elicit one response.

In conclusion, then, it appears that people manage questions in accordance with their conversational purposes; specifically, second language learners, regardless of their competence in formulating questions in instructional settings, will mark their real-life questions in such a way as to maximize the speech output of their interlocutor and minimize the risks and effort involved in their own speech output. Presumably they do this in order to stimulate further modeling of the target language and to decrease their own anxiety.

Finally, in analyzing data even from these very small studies, it is apparent that there are no easy explanations. The greatest understanding of disparate data from listening tests, production tasks, Teacher Talk and text analysis relevant to the study of question markers in Swedish seems to involve a complex interrelationship between transfer (albeit at a sophisticated level), input, and discourse function... at the very least.

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